Media and Digital Literacy

©THOMAS J FROEHLICH, PH.D.
PROFESSOR EMERITUS
SCHOOL OF INFORMATION
KENT STATE UNIVERSITY
KENT OH 44240
TFROEHLI@KENT.EDU
HTTP://PERSONAL.KENT.EDU/~TFROEHLI/

Definitions

- Media literacy is: "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" (Media literacy defined, 2010).

- Digital literacy is "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills" (Heitin, 2016).

- Digital literacy seems to be a cross of information literacy and media literacy, with an emphasis on its occurrence in digital technologies and environments (that do have some distinctive problems – e.g., false identities and spam attacks).

Media Literacy

Media literacy aims to educate about how to create and develop messages. The Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) characterizes media literacy with 5 core concepts:

"(1) all media messages are constructed;

(2) media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules;

(3) different people experience the same media message differently;

(4) media have embedded values and points of view; and (5) most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power" (Media literacy: Five core concepts, n.d.).

Unpacking the Narrative

- Each story has a narrative, and the narrative has a viewpoint and message that can be experienced differently by different recipients

- There is a motivation for the message: money, power, increased status, political control through information, disinformation, misinformation, or propaganda (which typically is more manipulative than simple disinformation).

- In order to really hear the message (what it really means or intends), we have to unpack the narrative of the message and the context behind the message.

- We can have a message that uses such facts as age, gender, race, and other details that are appropriate to the message. The same message implies that the details that were not used were appropriately omitted.

A Communication Model Exemplified

- I have developed a communication model to try to get at all the elements that might be involved in media literacy.

- As in the lecture on Cognitive Authorities, I will try to contrast two instances, Jennifer Rubin of the *Washington Post* versus Tucker Carlson of *Fox News.*

A Robust Communication Model

Sender-Agent	Message	Receiver-Interpreter
Sender-Agent	Content-Type	Receiver-Interpreter (Individual, Audience, Viewer)
Predisposition (Cognitive Bias)	Context	Predisposition
Intention? Harm, mislead, disinform? Prevent harm?	Content/Text	Intention
Motivation – support political cause or agenda?	Form	Motivation
Authority	Medium	Authority
Intended Target		Interpreted Message
Cognitive State: knowledge, beliefs, false beliefs, opinions, delusions	Enhancers: Repetition, Saturation,	Resulting Cognitive State: knowledge, beliefs, false beliefs, opinions, delusions
		Action: ignored, shared in support, shared in opposition; political action

Washington Post Example

- Rubin, J. (2021, August 4). Opinion | Americans have had it with vaccine refusers and anti-mandate politicians. *Washington Post*. Retrieved October 23, 2021, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/04/americans-have-had-it-with-vaccine-refusers-anti-mandate-pols/ Americans have had it with vaccine refusers and anti-mandate politicians.

Rubin: Key points

- Rational Americans no longer want to remain silent about the disinformation and lies regarding COVID-19 pushed by the loud and ignorant and politically motivated.

- "A new Axios-Ipsos poll finds: "The vaccinated said their top five targets of blame [for rising covid-19 cases] are the unvaccinated (79%), Trump (36%), conservative media (33%), people from other countries traveling to the U.S. (30%) and Americans traveling internationally (25%)." Well, they have got that right. It *is* unvaccinated people who have become petri dishes for the delta variant."

- "The unvaccinated would like to blame anyone but themselves. The poll reports: 'The unvaccinated cited as their top five targets of blame people from other countries traveling to the U.S. (37%), mainstream media (27%), Americans traveling internationally (23%), Biden (21%) and the unvaccinated (10%).' Aside from the 10 percent who figured out that they are the problem, the other scapegoats are either trivial factors or absurd (the mainstream media is responsible for the delta variant?). The answers suggest we are dealing with oppositional behavior and cult-like thinking not easily displaced by reason and common sense."

- They now find support from President Biden who congratulated those state leaders, governors, mayors, other political leaders and businesses that support vaccine mandates and admonished states for passing laws opposed to any vaccine or masking mandates. He cited in particular two states, Florida and Texas, who account for one-third of all new covid-19 cases in the entire country.

- It is clear that the anti-vaccine and masking rhetoric of those states (and similar Republican states) ae causing harm in two ways: physical harm (by sending thousands of Americans to sickness or death) and manipulating their emotional states for political or financial gain.

Sender	Example of Authenticated information
Sender-Agent-Creator	Jennifer Rubin (*Washington Post*)
Predisposition of Sender	Confirmation bias (conservative-left orientation), economic self-interest (e.g., make money for the *Post* and keep job),
Intention of Sender-Agent-Creator	To prevent harm (COVID-19 sickness or death)
Motivation of Sender	To promote information about how Republicans are at odds with most of the American public and businesses on dealing with COVID-19.
Method of Persuasion	Appeals to statistics and rational argumentation and the character of the speaker; Aristotle's rhetoric of ethos (appeals to the character of the speaker) or logos (rational argument, clarity of the claim) rather than pathos (appeal to emotions)
Authority	The credibility, reputation, and trustworthiness of the Washington Post and her reputation
Cognitive State	knowledge or true belief, trying to promote political awareness
Intended Target	the Washington Post audience, rational persons, unvaccinated

Message

Message	
Content-Type	Opinion editorial
Context	Promotion of a political insight
Content	Facts or evidence used; does not appear to have omitted anything; appeal to expert survey
Form	Text narrative
Medium	Print and online media
Enhancers	Repetition/shared throughout print sales and online media

Receiver	
Receiver-Interpreter	*Washington Post* readers, trickle-down information echoed/shared through online media and mail such as news alerts
Predisposition	Cognitive biases of her readers such as confirmation bias; feeds biases towards the left and also traditional conservatives – she distances herself from Trump conservatives (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/17/why-i-dropped-conservative-my-twitter-profile/);
Intention	To prevent her readers and their various relationships and all citizens from harm.
Motivation	To get information to confirm/extend/justify their beliefs about COVID-19 about the disinformation and misinformation promoted by Republicans
Authority	Belief in the results of well-designed and executed surveys; Reputation of the *Washington Post*
Cognitive State	According to the receiver, it becomes second-hand knowledge, or true belief, depending on their state of "knowledge," how it ties in what they already know, believe or experience.
Received Message	Belief in the claimed evidence; Republicans are using COVID-19 misinformation-disinformation for political gain and financial gain
Action Taken	Share information (through email, posts, word-of-mouth); take political action such as supporting vaccine mandates

Case of Media Message by Fox News

- Topic: Tucker blasts Biden's 'irrational demands' on vaccine mandates

- Rough transcript from the Tucker Carlson show, September 21, 2021.
  https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/tucker-blasts-bidens-irrational-demands-on-vaccine-mandates

Key quotes

- Unlike say the smallpox vaccine, which prevents you from getting smallpox, the COVID vaccines do not necessarily prevent you from getting COVID. The COVID vaccine does not prevent you from spreading COVID to other people. The long-term effects of the COVID vaccines are unknown, and at this point cannot be known.

- We do know the vaccines are many times less effective than natural immunity in protecting people, and close to 100 million Americans already have natural immunity. We know that in some cases, the COVID vaccines cause potentially fatal heart problems in the people who take them.

- One new study shows that teenage boys are six times more likely to suffer cardiac damage from the shot than they are to be hospitalized with COVID itself.

- So, it's a mixed picture that some of what we know about the COVID vaccines, and yet these very same vaccines which are far less effective than we were told they were initially, which are potentially dangerous for some and completely unnecessary for tens of millions of others are now nevertheless mandatory for virtually everyone in America.

Quotes

- [Responding to the vaccine mandates announced by President Biden in September 2021]:

- If you missed the speech, go back and watch it online. That address -- Biden's address -- was the most divisive speech ever given by a modern American President. Virtually every sentence of the speech reinforced a single point again and again, and it was this -- your fellow Americans are dangerous to you -- they could kill you -- and that includes your family, it includes your friends, it includes the people you sit next to at work. All of these people are threats to you and only the Biden administration can save you.

- Quote: "We're going to protect vaccinated workers from unvaccinated workers." That's what the President said.

- Think about that for a moment. Does it make sense? If the vaccine works, and they assure us adamantly that it does work, and they'd punish us if we question how well it works, then how can the unvaccinated possibly pose a threat to the vaccinated? How? What exactly is the risk to the vaccinated from the unvaccinated?

- The entire argument is transparently absurd, and once you realize that, you realize that none of this endless talking about public health at this point is really about public health. If it was about public health, the authorities would simply make the vaccines available to anyone who wanted a vaccine, call it a victory, which it would be and leave it there.

- But that's not what it's about, it's about power. These demands are so obviously irrational that forcing you to accept them without complaint is the whole point of the exercise it is a form of sadomasochism. It is dominance and submission.

Sender	Example of Disinformation
Sender-Agent-Creator	Tucker Carlson (The Tucker Carlson Show on *Fox News*)
Predisposition of Sender	Confirmation bias (radical right ideology), economic self-interest (e.g., make money for himself and *Fox News*), political power –"owning the libs" (those opposed to the "tradition")
Intention of Sender-Agent-Creator	To cause harm (COVID-19 sickness or death), civil unrest and the overthrow of democracy for an authoritarian government (Republican party rule)
Motivation of Sender	To promote misinformation and disinformation about vaccination; to manipulate, seduce or control the political position of their viewers and converts through emotional engagement
Method of Persuasion	Sophistry, projection; Aristotle's rhetoric of pathos (appeal to emotions), rather than ethos (appeals to the character of the speaker) or logos (rational argument, clarity of the claim)
Authority	Right-wing ideology; Right-wing political and thought leaders and its echo system
Cognitive State	False belief pushed as authoritative second-hand knowledge
Intended Target	the *Fox News* audience and converts, the vaccine-hesitant or the unvaccinated; all those in the alt-right echo system

Message

Message	
Content-Type	Opinion paraded as knowledge or skepticism; framing
Context	Promotion of a political solidarity (for like-minded) and civil unrest (for the non-like-minded)
Content	Projection (blaming the opposition with what they are exactly doing)
Form	Video narrative and derived text, both echoed online through email, video clips or social media
Medium	Video media and derivations, clips and textual narratives
Enhancers	Repetition - shared throughout print sales and online media from multiple sources and saturation – multiple sources for projecting the same or similar message

Receiver-Interpreter	
Receiver-Interpreter	*Fox News* viewers, trickle-down information echoed/shared through online media and mail such as news alerts
Predisposition	Cognitive biases of viewers and followers, such as confirmation bias and disconfirmation bias (other cognitive biases as well); to feed their biases of their tribe: the right and "conservatives."
Intention	To receive "information" that confirms their rejection of scientific knowledge and the justification for their political ideology
Motivation	To get knowledge to confirm/extend/justify their disbeliefs about COVID-19 vaccination and policies that reject vaccine or masking mandates; justify and enhance their anger at the opposition and for their individual rights; self-righteousness.
Authority	Reputation of the *Fox News* and Carlson who is believed to be trustworthy, reliable and an expert. Their belief: he speaks "the real " against liberal bias and for conservative values.
Cognitive State	According to the receiver, the message is interpreted as second-hand knowledge, or true belief, based on the disinformation ecology in which they exist; it reality it is false belief
Received Message	Belief in the asserted claims, that the government and the liberals are spreading fake news about the treatments and cures for COVID-19.
Action Taken	Share information (through email, posts, word-of-mouth); take political action such as disrupting meetings on public health or shame or intimidation on those who follow vaccine or masking mandates

Another Inflammatory Example

- "As for forcing children to wear masks outside, that should be illegal. Your response when you see children wearing masks as they play should be no different from your response to seeing someone beat a kid in Walmart. Call the police immediately. Contact Child Protective Services. Keep calling until someone arrives. What you're looking at is abuse, it's child abuse, and you are morally obligated to attempt to prevent it."

- "If it's your own children being abused, then act accordingly. Let's say your kid's school emailed you and announced that every day after lunch, your sixth-grader was going to get punched in the face by a teacher. How would you respond to that?" he asked. "That's precisely how you should respond when they tell you that your kids have to wear masks on the soccer field. That is unacceptable, it is dangerous, and we should act like it because it is. But too few of us have responded like that. We have been shamefully passive in the face of all of this."

- https://thehill.com/homenews/media/550403-tucker-carlson-contact-child-protective-services-if-you-see-children-wearing?rl=1

- For an excellent video commentary on the sophistry of Tucker Carlson, see John Oliver's assessment on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMGxxRRtmHc

- Given the influence of Fox News and their echo system, such remarks are meant to rile up their base, to keep them addicted to their anger, make money and support alt-right ideology.

Continuing Research

- Problems with the model? Is it too complicated? Can it be efficiently and effectively simplified?

- Can we develop clarity about the differences between predispositions which are largely unconscious, from intention and motivation, both of which are relatively conscious?

- How do we sort out the attempted strategy of disinformation from its actual effects?

- Given the deluge of information from so many channels there must include institutional bi-partisan responses such as policy making by government (Federal, state and local), by media (online and print), and other content providers (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, other social media).

- Good workbook on media and information literacy: *Media and information literacy: a practical guidebook of trainers:* https://www.dw.com/en/media-and-information-literacy-a-practical-guidebook-for-trainers-third-edition/a-42423367

Media Ethics

Media ethics promotes a "capacity to contribute clarity and build trust around verified content" (Ireton & Posetti, p. 27). Its core principles are (Ireton & Posetti, pp. 27-28):

- Accuracy: trying to get the fact rights
- Independence: having an independent voice, not acting on behalf of special interests and acknowledging any conflicts of interest
- Fairness: sorting the evidence to provide a fair picture
- Confidentiality: maintaining the trust and privacy of information sources
- Humanity: the impact of journalism must be considered by not inappropriately maligning persons or groups
- Accountability: must correct errors, and listen to opposing voices and resources
- Transparency: describes the situation that occurs when journalists and newspapers openly communicate important information to their audiences

Digital Ethics

- There has also emerged a field of digital ethics, which Daniel Richards asserts, "encompasses how users and participants in online environments interact with each other and the technologies and platforms used to engage."

- He adds, "An important part of maintaining a solid digital ethos is critically reflecting on your choices of online self-representation and whether or not these choices reflect your goals as a student and as a professional" (Richards, n.d.).

- Given a particular context, are one's choices of self-representation or for the representation of others ethical? The basic idea is that the ethical principles that we invoke in other environments should be invoked online and on digital media such as cell phones: e.g., do not spread rumors about others that you would not have done to yourself. (Ethical principle 1)

Digital Ethics

- Jonathan Terrasi points out that "Personal digital ethics encompass how individual users honor one another's right to self-determination online. What makes these unique compared to the typical ethics guiding interpersonal conduct is that, given the nature of online infrastructure, communications is almost always mediated by some private interest or third-party" (Terrasi, 2019).

- As noted earlier in lecture about social media, they are hosting sites in which users participate but which they do not control, though they can control what they contribute to it.
  - If a friend sends one a photo of oneself, such photos should not be shared in social media without the consent of the friend.

- Terrasi contrasts personal digital ethics with corporate digital ethics, which "revolves around the practices of online platforms like social networks collecting sensitive information about users." (Terrasi, 2019).
  - Google, Amazon, and other large online companies collect information about their users, and there is no clear expectation of what can and should be done with such information, including the right of users to control the data about themselves